Getting it Right Quickly

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I am tempted to say that whatever doctrine the armed forces are working on now, they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter. . . . What does matter is their ability to get it right quickly, when the moment arrives. . . . When everybody starts wrong, the advantage goes to the side which can most quickly adjust itself to the new and unfamiliar environment and learn from its mistakes.[1] — Sir Michael Howard

THIS ARTICLE ADDRESSES the question, "How can leaders make their units into organizations that learn from their mistakes and 'get it right quickly?'" The question is important for several reasons. Most important, the lives of soldiers and success in combat depend on how well units learn from their mistakes. As a 1945 War Department pamphlet explains, "The old saying 'live and learn' must be reversed in war, for there we 'learn and live'; otherwise we die. It is with this learning in order to live that the Army is so vitally concerned."[2] Additionally, leadership doctrine and Officer Personnel Management System XXI direct that Army leaders build units which learn and adapt quickly. For example, the new officer evaluation report (OER) requires that officers be rated on how well they "foster a learning environment in their units."[3]

However, leaders face many challenges in building units that truly learn. First, defining such an organization and then measuring the effectiveness of how well it learns is difficult. Second, only limited literature and doctrine provide the performance measures for unit learning. Third, tactical units are not structured to maximize unit learning and use it to their best advantage. Finally, as former Army Chief of Staff General Gordon R. Sullivan suggests, "the most difficult challenge is developing a culture that values this kind of learning."[4]

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Defining and Measuring Learning in Tactical Units

Defining the characteristics of an organization that effectively learns and quickly adapts to changes is an elusive challenge. Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* popularized the term "learning organization" among both civilian and military leaders. Senge defines the learning organization as one that is "continually expanding its capacity to create its future . . . it is not enough to merely survive. 'Survival learning' or what is more often termed 'adaptive learning' is important. . . . But for a learning organization, adaptive learning must be joined with 'generative learning,' learning that enhances our ability to create."[5] Sullivan adds, "As we, the leaders deal with tomorrow, our task is not to make perfect plans. . . . Our task is to create organizations that are sufficiently flexible and versatile that they can take our imperfect plans and make them work in execution. That is the essential character of the learning organization."[6]

These two definitions do not offer much to a new second lieutenant—or to a battalion commander, for that matter. The real question remains unanswered: "How do I know when I have a learning organization?" The above definitions suggest two ways a leader can measure how well his or her unit learns.

The most obvious method to measure a unit's ability to learn is when the unit stops making the same mistakes. To measure this requires that mistakes be identified, which normally occurs during after-action reviews (AARs). After identifying a mistake and rectifying the error, leaders must establish a system to catch repeated mistakes. The system must also be able to determine whether other units within the organization share this problem. If there is a trend within the entire organization, training plans must be developed to reverse the trend.

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Soldier participation in AARs is another way to determine how well the unit learns. There are at least four reasons why soldiers do not participate in AARs:

- The unit may have performed the task perfectly, and the AAR participants have nothing to add.
- Perhaps the soldiers are afraid to say anything for fear of reprisal from their chain of command.
- The facilitator may perform a critique rather than an AAR and not allow the soldiers to participate.
- The soldiers may not know doctrine well enough to make an informed decision on the unit's performance.

The last three reasons for lack of participation during AARs are symptoms of an organization that fails to learn effectively.

The above comments represent just a few ways to gauge the degree to which a unit learns. Other examples range from the intangible standard of the unit's level of initiative (reflected partly when executing imperfect plans) to the quality of written AARs. However, it is important to remember that, "You probably never become a learning organization in any absolute sense; it can only be something that you aspire to, always 'becoming,' never truly 'being.'"[7] Defining a learning organization is a start to becoming. However, clear and succinct doctrine can guide the way.

Limitations of Doctrine

The Army has been an evolving learning organization since Baron von Steuben trained the soldiers of the Continental Army at Valley Forge. Von Steuben adjusted the Prussian military system to unique American characteristics and wrote the *Blue Book*, which was the US Army's first warfighting doctrine. However, it was not until World War I that the Army began to develop a *learning* doctrine, "the Army's first such organizational effort at contemporaneous lesson learning, and each succeeding war steadily improved the machinery and raised the level of general awareness."[8]

Organizations with staffs focused solely on gathering, analyzing and disseminating lessons were established during each war; however, those organizations disbanded after the wars ended. This was the case until 1985, when the Army established the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL). In 1989 Army Regulation (AR) 11-33, *Army Lessons Learned Program: Development and Application,* established CALL as the focal point for the Army's lessons-learned system.[9] The next year FM 25-101, *Battle Focused Training,* was published, providing the procedures and standards for conducting AARs. The new FM 22-100, *Army Leadership*, establishes "learning" as a senior leader action. These three publications guide leaders in creating learning organizations. They are good documents, but they inadequately address the problem.

AR 11-33 focuses on the Armywide lessons learned program without providing guidance on how units should learn lessons. It does, however, mandate that units provide lessons to the Army system through CALL. The regulation requires that major Army commands (MACOMs) provide CALL with "after-action reports or other appropriate observations . . . significant objective and subjective observations and insights within 120 days of each combat training center (CTC) rotation . . . and semiannual synopsis of significant trends."[10] Interviews with personnel at CALL reveal that this is simply not happening. Rarely, if ever, does CALL receive such reports from the MACOMs.

There are several possible reasons for this breakdown. AR 11-33 is a rather obscure regulation, and it is possible that its directives are not being enforced because no one knows that they exist. However, the disconnect is much more subtle—lesson learning within the Army occurs at two levels: the "local circuit" and the "Armywide circuit."[11] The problem is the lash up between these two circuits.

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Von Steuben training a cadre of Continental soldiers to become the Army's first drill sergeants.

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The Armywide circuit falls under the responsibility of CALL. For the most part, CALL has successfully collected and disseminated lessons through both active and passive means. CALL actively collects lessons by deploying Combined Arms Assessment Teams (CAATs) to observe and document lessons from training exercises and real-world contingency operations. CALL passively collects lessons through the submission of articles and observations from individual officers, soldiers and civilians in the field. CALL also collects information, both actively and passively, from the CTC. In all cases the material is then published in newsletters, bulletins or placed in the CALL database—all are accessible through CALL's website.

The failing circuit is at the local level—with the squads through the divisions. CALL does receive articles and observations from selected individuals; however, there is no concerted effort at the division level and below to collate usable lessons in the form of AARs and then submit them to CALL. There are at least three possible reasons for this. The first is that units are not conducting AARs, which is doubtful since our doctrine clearly requires AARs after all training events. The second possibility is that AARs are not being conducted to standard; therefore, learning is not happening to its fullest potential. Finally, systems may not be in place to collect AAR results and submit them to CALL.

The very heart of the Army's ability to grow, particularly at the tactical level, is deeply rooted in the AAR process. Through AARs units internalize lessons that soldiers discover. The AAR process marked the turning point for the US Army in institutionalizing organizational learning by ingraining "respect for organizational learning [and] fostering an expectation that decisions and consequent action will be reviewed in a way that will benefit both the participants and the organization, no matter how painful it may be at the time. The only real failure is the failure to learn."[12]

The AAR, though a powerful vehicle for unit learning, must be performed to standard to realize its true benefit. FM 25-100, *Training the Force,* summarizes those standards as "a structured review process that allows training participants to discover for themselves what happened, why it happened and how it can be done better. The AAR is a professional discussion that requires the active participation of those being trained. An AAR is not a critique."[13] For the AAR to be anything less than a professional discussion with the active participation of all those being trained undermines a unit's learning environment.

Most units probably conduct AARs regularly but not necessarily to standard. One study found that "the majority of AARs are not problem-solving sessions, nor are AAR leaders following doctrinal AAR guidance with respect to discussion participation."[14] If this is the case, the Army's system for learning is in trouble. However, if units are performing AARs to standard, the disposition of the lessons still remains.

The key is creating a "learning culture" within the unit. The leader must articulate a learning ideology and establish the standards for learning in the organization. Those standards must be routinely reinforced, and new members of the unit—particularly leaders—must receive training on key components of the program, such as how to conduct AARs. The results from AARs must be documented, disseminated, archived and re-addressed when systemic problems are identified.

AAR results often remain localized. FM 25-101 provides the standards for conducting AARs but does not require recording the results. Therefore, only the unit that learns a lesson from the AAR process benefits unless the knowledge spreads by word of mouth—a major failing in the Army's learning doctrine. Units must have systems to archive the results of AARs and then disseminate those results throughout the entire organization and eventually to CALL. Without such sharing, the entire Army lessons-learned program is in jeopardy. However, the reason for this failure may be that tactical units are not structured within their staffs to use the information from AARs to their best advantage.

Restructuring Tactical Units to Facilitate Learning

For maximum learning, efforts to collate, analyze and disseminate information must be centralized. For tactical units, a central agency must be responsible for collecting, analyzing and disseminating lessons. It makes the most sense that the G3/S3 be the focal point for collating lessons in tactical units. These staffs are responsible for facilitating training; during peacetime, most lessons occur during training events; the routine training reports should include AAR comments. However, this is not normally the case. FM 101-5, *Staff Organization and Operations*, does not designate a staff with responsibility to collect, analyze and disseminate lessons. The Army has identified CALL as its institutional "focal point" without delineating organizational responsibilities.

This lack of staff structure produces decentralized, local and ad hoc learning. The entire organization does not benefit from the lessons gained. Until doctrine mandates responsibility for centralized collection and dissemination of lessons in tactical units, uniformly sharing those lessons across the Army is unlikely. This is not to say that leaders cannot implement such a structure within their units. However, that would require creating a unit culture that promotes learning to its fullest potential.

The Learning Culture

One does not normally associate the idea of culture to small groups, such as platoons, companies and battalions, but rather whole societies. Still, culture can powerfully influence units to value learning. The leader is central to developing organizational culture and uses several mechanisms, each important to sustaining learning.

A unique and clearly articulated ideology. Leaders need not go beyond FM 22-100 to establish the learning ideology of their units. The key point of the manual is that the leader "makes or breaks" a learning organization. The leader sets the tone for the unit by establishing how well he or she listens and takes advice, sometimes sounding like criticism, which for some leaders is difficult to take. If the leader is not willing to learn, it is unlikely that the unit will learn to its fullest potential. The command climate must welcome ideas from every soldier on how to improve the unit.

Repetitive socializing and training in key cultural values. Leaders and soldiers must be trained in the proper procedures for conducting and participating in AARs. Since participation is the cornerstone to good AARs, soldiers and leaders must be aware of what they have learned and encourage one enough to articulate the lessons in an open forum. Thus, knowing Army doctrine and established tactics, techniques and procedures is key to becoming a learning organization. Soldiers and leaders must know what they do not know when the time comes to evaluate mistakes.

Probably the best way to socialize soldiers and leaders into the learning culture is to institutionalize a variation of the AAR into every activity a unit conducts. A quick AAR can be conducted after motor stables, road marches, physical training and even command and staff meetings. Another technique: every day before the close of business, assemble the leaders and ask the simple question, "What have we learned today?"

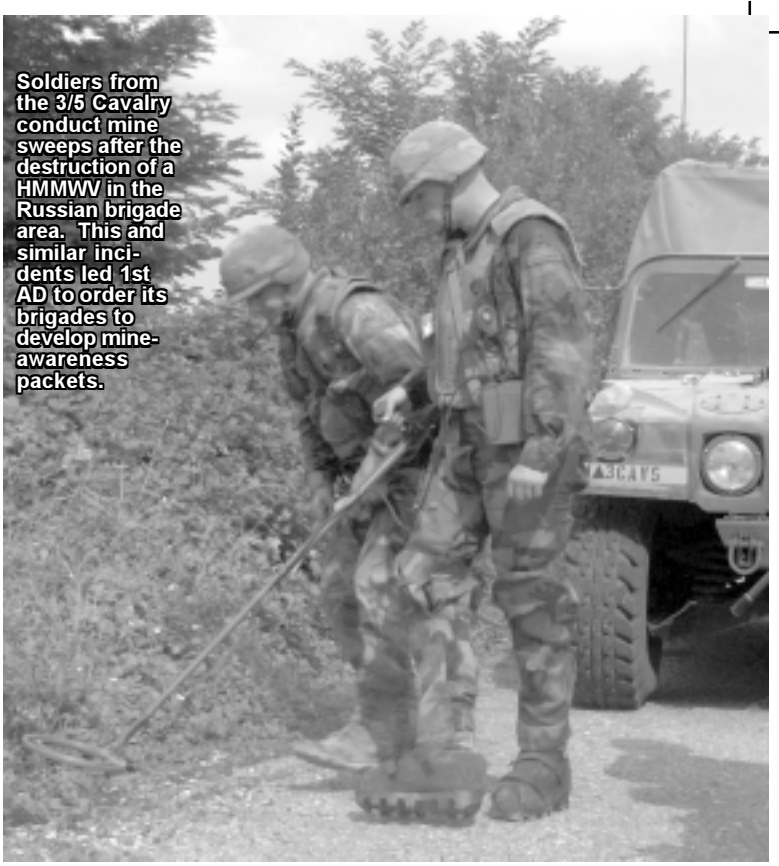
Appraise and reward behavior consistent with the desired outcome. With the new OER, the Army has established a way of rewarding leaders for promoting learning in their units. For soldiers and NCOs it may be somewhat more difficult, other than saying, "good job." However, publishing their ideas is one way to reward those individuals. This is not difficult and is essential to the total Army Lessons Learned Program. Being published in a CALL bulletin should have some bearing on qualifying for an "Excellence" in the competence block of the Noncommissioned Officer Evaluation Report. Regardless of the professional benefit, seeing one's name in print is often reward enough.

Organizational design that reinforces key cultural values among all members. The problem of suboptimal structure within tactical units has already been discussed, but there is a powerful link between an organization's structure and its culture. While Army doctrine does not address how to structure a learning organization within a tactical unit, leaders can still configure learning systems within their units. Some of these techniques have already been identified. However, the best way to illustrate the point is by providing a recent example.

During Operation *Joint Endeavor*, the 1st Armored Division (AD), commanded by Major General William Nash, effectively established a model learning culture for units both in peacetime and during contingency operations.[15] The 1st AD was the nucleus of the "Multinational Division-North" (MND-North), one of three multinational divisions forming the Implementing Force (IFOR). MND-North, or Task Force (TF) *Eagle*, was to help implement the requirements outlined in the General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP), which the former warring factions of Bosnia-Herzegovina had signed on 14 December 1995.

Nash's program centered on the brigades within his TF. Each TF brigade was required to conduct frequent AARs. The information from the AARs was documented and submitted to the division headquarters through CALL's team chief, who was in charge of CALL's collection effort in Bosnia. The team chief initially worked directly for Nash, but on subsequent CAAT's the team chief worked for the G3. The information usually passed via e-mail or on the maneuver control system (MCS). The team chief or his designated representative would then analyze the information and write what came to be known as "The Latest Lesson Learned" bulletin. Nash would review the bulletins and those approved would be disseminated to all platoon-size TF units. A new bulletin would be disseminated every 72 hours in paper copy, through the MCS and on e-mail. Additionally, a "Lessons Learned" e-mail folder allowed all units easy access.

The key component of the process was the AAR. The brigades required all platoons to conduct AARs and document the results. The battalion S3s maintained copies of the AARs and archived them. Additionally, at least once Nash facilitated a TF level AAR after the TF had experienced several "mine incidents." For this particular AAR, the brigades were required to develop mine-awareness packets that contained the results of the platoon-level AARs and the lessons from the mine incidents. Each brigade commander was required to brief the significant findings from the AARs.



Soldiers from the 3/5 Cavalry conduct mine sweeps after the destruction of a HMMWV in the Russian brigade area. This and similar incidents led 1st AD to order its brigades to develop mine-awareness packets.

US Army

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The TF *Eagle* model for learning provides a methodology for leaders at every level throughout the Army. Keys to learning lessons:

- Leaders must mandate that AARs occur frequently. At a minimum, after all peacetime training events and after completed missions during contingency operations.
- The results of the AARs must be documented and archived. There must be a system to identify mistakes and "relearned" lessons. If this is the case the unit may have a systemic problem to address. One TF battalion addressed the status of "lessons learned" from previous AARs. The commander required leaders to describe the steps implemented to prevent reoccurring problems.
- There must be a system to disseminate the lessons. As organizations become more automated this sharing is easier, although smaller units may still

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rely more on oral and hard-copy dissemination, particularly at company level and below. The requirement to maintain written copies of the lessons remains.

- The lessons must come through a central agency for analysis before they are disseminated. Nash pointed out that "Lesson learning is dangerous business."[16] Leaders must ensure soldiers do not learn the wrong lessons. What may have worked in one instance may have been an anomaly.
- The unit leader must establish an environment that facilitates a "learning culture."
- Clearly, the CALL CAAT greatly facilitated collection and dissemination of lessons learned. On major contingency operations, a CAAT will likely deploy with the unit. Nash used the CAAT as part of his staff. However, such a system, with or without a CAAT, must be established.

One may ask, "What benefit did TF *Eagle* gain?" In an environment where death or injury was literally a step away, casualties to mine incidents were very few. Other lessons include everything from conducting joint patrols with the Russians to techniques that prevent tent fires.

The most prominent example is probably the overall success of the mission in Bosnia, where only two-and-a-half years ago the former warring factions were intent on making one another extinct. The Turkish market in Sarajevo, where citizens now walk free from mortar attacks, shows the fruits of our soldier's labor in Bosnia. Our soldiers' ability to learn and adapt to an ambiguous environment has contributed to that success.

The leader with the imagination and the will to create a learning organization can do it. The key is creating a "learning culture" within the unit. The leader must articulate a learning ideology and establish the standards for learning in the organization. Those standards must be routinely reinforced, and new members of the unit—particularly leaders—must receive training on key components of the program, such as how to conduct AARs. The results from AARs must be documented, disseminated, archived and re-addressed when systemic problems are identified.

Leaders are the focus of every unit's learning program. The success of the program depends on leaders' ability to sustain an environment that encourages learning as a unit value. After the first six months of *Joint Endeavor*, Nash said, "The impact of sustained operations should be, for our junior leaders, a career-defining experience that internalizes in their professional souls the lessons of doing things right. We must take advantage of this unique opportunity to create a cadre of professional soldiers who are able to sustain operations to standard and have the moral courage to do what's right all the time."[17] Every day, wherever soldiers are deployed, whether in training or on a contingency operation, the opportunity to internalize lessons confronts leaders who are willing to learn. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Michael Howard, "Military Science in the Age of Peace," *RUSI, Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies* (March 1974), 6.
2. US War Department, *Lessons Learned and Expedients used in Combat: Pamphlet 20-17* (Washington, DC, July 1945), iii.
3. *Learning* is a rated block on the OER. Raters are to evaluate officers both on individual learning and on unit learning. The new US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Army Leadership*, 31 August 1999 also identifies *learning* as a "senior leader action."
4. Gordon R. Sullivan and Michael V. Harper, *Hope Is Not A Method* (New York: Times Business, 1996), 197.
5. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Doubleday Publishing Group Inc., 1990), 14.
6. Sullivan, 189.
7. Ibid., 193.
8. Dennis J. Vetock, *Lessons Learned: A History of US Army Lesson Learning* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army Military History Institute, US Army War College, 1988), 127.
9. Department of the Army Regulation 11-33, *Army Lessons Learned Program: System Development and Application* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office [GPO], 1989), 5.
10. Ibid.
11. Vetock, 127.
12. Sullivan, 193.
13. US Army FM 25-101, *Training the Force: Battle Focused Training* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1990), 5-2.
14. Justin Gubler, "Unit Simulation Training System After Action Reviews [AAR]: A Novel Approach to Achieve Effectiveness" (Masters Thesis, University of Central Florida, 1997), 139.
15. I spent six months in Bosnia as a CALL collections officer, three months were with the 1st Brigade, 1st Armored Division, commanded by COL Greg Fontenot; and three months in Tuzla, Bosnia, as the CALL team chief, responsible for collecting, analyzing and disseminating lessons throughout the TF.
16. Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Operation Joint Endeavor Initial Impressions Report: Initial Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Combined Arms Center, 1996), iii.
17. Center for Army Lessons Learned, *Training While Employing* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Combined Arms Center, 1997), II-6.

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